DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 059 751 LI 003 490

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TITLE	Theory, Method and Games in Communication.
PUB DATE	68
NOTE	8p.; (6 References); Paper prepared for Meeting of the Behavioral Science Section of the International Association for Mass Communication Research, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia, September 2-5, 1968
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Communication (Thought Transfer); *Comprehension; Content Analysis; Criteria; *Feedback; Games; Information Theory; *Mass Media; Models; *Research; Selection

ABSTRACT

The thesis that the methods in mass communication research for collecting, analyzing and interpreting data should relate directly to the theoretical models of communication is argued in this speech. Communication models indicate that a source can usually communicate more effectively in the presence of feedback from relevant receivers on their comprehension of the messages. Another problem of interest to communicators is that of assessing audience preferences and selection behavior and relating these to those of editors, broadcast programmers and other mass communication gatekeepers. The many agencies whose major function is to facilitate fruitful social and economic changes are involved in the problem of developing research to assist directly in planning communication strategies. Generally, it is argued that more can be learned about communication processes by making the research methods more appropriate to the theories. It is believed that some fascinating aspects of communication can be discovered by making up theoretically relevant communication games. (NH)

THEORY, METHOD AND GAMES IN COMMUNICATION

by

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A Paper Prepared for a Meeting of the Behavioral Science Section of the International Association for Mass Communication Research
Ljubljana, Yugoslavia
September 2-5, 1968

Theory, Method and Games in Communication

I will argue here the thesis that our methods in mass communication research for collecting, analyzing and interpreting data should relate directly to our theoretical models of communication. This may seem a too simple and obvious thesis. We all know, you might reply, that science basically involves processes of learning and communication.

I would agree that it is too simple and obvious a thesis if all around me I did not find studies which blatantly ignore its implications.

Our communication models say that a source can usually communicate more effectively in the presence of feedback from relevant receivers on their comprehension of his messages. Do they understand what he tells them in ways which he intends?

Think of the many content analyses in our field which present no tests of intercoder reliabilities, or the studies which do present such tests but clearly fail to understand their communication purposes. If a researcher asks himself why intercoder reliabilities tests are necessary, he may come to realize that such tests fundamentally and rather simply represent feedback on how well he can communicate to others (important which others) what he means by his content categories, or symbols, or themes or other constructs. How well can he instruct other researchers or practitioners on what must be included in or excluded from each category? Looking at intercoder reliabilities in this way may raise questions about the common practice in content studies of (usually private - that is, not communicated to the reader) discussion about coding among coders for the very purpose of increasing reliabilities. Unless the researcher fully reports these discussions to the readers, his reliability coefficients may far overestimate

how well he communicates his content category system to his readers -- other researchers and practitioners, say.

Now, let us look at the intercoder reliability in possible practical applications. If reliability tests of this kind are indeed good indexes of message comprehension, why not use such tests in the training of communicators. Students of communication might learn a great deal by experimenting with various ways of getting readers to understand a content category system and a set of coding instructions. We might even construct games in which students can compete with each other or with their own past performances for highest intercoder reliability scores.

I started this argument of relevance of theory to method with an example from content analysis. I presume that almost all of us have worked with content analysis in some form or other. I can readily expand the example to other kinds of communication research.

For example, another problem that interests some of us is that of assessing audience preferences and selection behavior and relating these to those of editors, broadcast programmers and the many other mass communication gatekeepers. Here we are dealing with decisions to read or not, to view or not, to listen or not, to print or not, to broadcast or not, etc. In system terms, we have gatekeepers assigning and operating on input -- news messages, say -- rejecting some, passing some along without much change, and passing some along in much modified form. Output from these gatekeepers then becomes part of a pool of input for various receivers who also may process it and pass some of it along to other receivers. And so it goes.

Now, it seems to me reasonable to assume that such decisions are based in part on each individual's hierarchy of basic relevant values, the press of various

situational forces, his patterns of relevant interests, his anticipation of problems he or his significant others will have to cope with, his tastes and even his mood at the moment of decision.

One of our great challenges is to develop methods of observation, data collection and analysis which more adequately than now reflect the kind of processural theory outlined above. To the extent our methods fail to operate in terms of our theory, we probably fail to test and develop that theory.

To understand selections by editors or readers we must observe individuals processing many different kinds of input materials. What are some major differences between materials selected and materials rejected? From answers to that question we infer criteria used in selection. Then, we can begin to test these inferences by constructing a sample of input materials along dimensions indicated by our inferred criteria. This, of course, requires careful analysis of content and form of the messages, plus depth probing of the individual's reasons for selection and rejection. Then, we can ask our editors and readers to operate on this message sample. To the extent our inferences are accurate, we should be able to predict how editors and readers will operate on the new sample of messages.

Suppose the predictions are largely successful. Then we will want to dig furheer to discover whence our inferred and tested criteria or news values derive.

Several years ago, Mrs. Anne Li-an Kao and I studied reader preferences for 120 magazine pictures. After analyzing the patterns of picture preference, we chose two readers -- a man and a woman -- whose patterns were dissimilar. We divided the picture sample in two by stratified random procedures. We then asked newspaper editors, college students with training in photojournalism and editing and college students with no such training to "predict" the picture preference patterns of the man and woman reader. That is, they were told the instructions

given the readers, told something about each reader, then asked to sort a criterion aample of 60 pictures twice, once for the way they thought the man had sorted the pictures and again for the way they thought the woman reader had sorted the pictures. We then correlated predictive with actual picture preference patterns. These correlations were used as scores of predictive accuracy.

We found that our editors and students could predict with much better than chance accuracy, when they learned how the two readers had each sorted the other sample of 60 pictures. In the absence of such information, experienced editors seemed to have stereotypes of reader preference which reduced especially their accuracy in predicting the woman's picture preference.

Editors and students alike seemed to enjoy the challenge of trying to predict reader preferences. Here, again, we seem to have research procedures which can readily be made to reflect processes of choice and decisions in communication. And we have again an educational game which communicators can use to sensitize themselves to values, interests and preferences of readers and other important members of communication systems.

A more complicated but related problem is that of developing research to assist direetly in planning communication strategies. There are many agencies today whose major function is to facilitate fruitful social and economic change. In such an agency, a professional communicator working with communication researchers can do several very useful things. First, he can use research as a tool to help clients or potential clients of his agency communicate relevant problems to top planners and executives in his agency. Unfortunately, few of our traditional public relations people take this important step. Further, he can study the ways in which clients are presently trying to cope with relevant problems. He can study their beliefs in regard to those problems and to the work of his own and other agencies on the problem.

Suppose, for the moment, that you are a communication director and researcher for a public health agency. You would certainly want careful analyses of the systems and subsystems relevant to your communication purposes. Let us say that the agency plans a large-scale immunization program. The success of the program, let us say, depends on the whole population or at least nearly all of it complying voluntarily with your agency's request to come to mobile stations to be innoculated.

Now, let me simplify the matter. Imagine that I have identified just one individual in that population, but you don't know who he is, where he lives, how he thinks, or even whether he is a he. Now, tell me, what about my Mr. and Mrs. or Miss or Master X would you pay most to know. Your aim is to get him to go get that shot and perhaps to help you to get others to go get theirs. You can't talk with him directly. There are millions in this population. How will you get into his sphere of awareness? How might you attract his attention? How can you keep it? How can you insure that he will understand your messages the way you wish? Will he believe that your messages are true and that it will be in his best interest to go to be immunized? How can you get him to act?

Again, we have a communication and decision game. And it is easy to complicate this one. We don't just have one person, but millions. For others, there may be different answers to the questions above. It is at this point that many communicators seem to resort to a grossly stereotyped image of the receiver, or attempt to make something from averaged or aggregate descriptions from audience surveys.

Some of us are working with models and procedures for communication strategies problems which depend heavily on William Stephenson's Q technique. This technique emphasizes large samples of content and small, purposefully selected samples of

persons. It uses a semi-ranking system called the Q-sort which requires the person responding to evaluate materials, statements items or whatever relative to each other. In this, it is like rank-ordering, paired comparisons, triad and other ipsative (within self) systems. Q-sort is more efficient than other systems for large samples of content. The value of ipsative analysis for some of the problems described above is that it reflects more closely than normative (among persons) analysis the apparent bases for decisions.

Through factor analysis, Q technique yields typologies of persons in terms of patterns of beliefs, values, interests, activities, source evaluations, content emphasis or whatever the investigator is interested in. Thus, it becomes possible, for example, to describe a comprehensive and complex belief pattern for each of several types isolated in factor analysis. Then, for each belief type we can determine which more general values the type holds in high or low esteem, which relevant communication sources that type trusts or distrusts, which television and radio programs and films he attends, which magazines and newspapers he reads, and any of the other things which might help communicators to plan more effective communication between his agency and its clients.

Generally, I have argued here that we might learn more and learn faster about communication processes by making our research methods more appropriate to our theories. I think we can discover some fascinating aspects of communication by making up theoretically relevant communication games.

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